

Lofgren

To: EPA Public Listening Session on the Aging Initiative  
From: Ruth Lofgren, Ph. D.  
Date: April 8, 2003 from 1:30 to 3:30 PM  
Site: University Auditorium - UTHSC, San Antonio, Texas  
Re: Written Testimony: **Value of Volunteering in Environmental Programs**

## **INTRODUCTION:**

It used to be that someone in their 80's was very old, but not any more. Now someone needs to be over one hundred to be "old." At 86, I consider myself to be "mature." As a former biology professor, it was simple to continue in the field of work I loved by becoming involved in a project to improve the quality of the environment in San Antonio.

## **A MISSION:**

Dr. Karl Meninger says that every person needs a mission, something that you really care about. The natural world is a rich source inspiration: protection of wilderness areas, concern for endangered species, work to reduce air and water pollution, or the cleanup of contaminated areas. As Water Chair for the League of Women Voters, I was appointed to the Wastewater Advisory Committee for City Council. San Antonio is a very old city, but its wastewater system began only a little over 100 years ago. Until recently, it has never been able to keep up with the growth of the city. In 1901 the excess sewage from the city's sewage farm ran in an open canal to a small irrigation lake. After a sewage treatment plant was built in the 30's, only excess treated sludge was piped to Mitchell Lake.

## **VOLUNTEERISM:**

Birds migrating along the Central Flyway of North America stopped at Mitchell Lake to rest and feed. Local birdwatchers had discovered what a marvelous site this was for observing birds of the western hemisphere. Over the decades, records indicate that over 300 species of birds have been seen here. When neighbors complained of the smell, the state regulatory agency ordered San Antonio "to abate the nuisance." In 1973 at the urging of members of the San Antonio Audubon Society, the City Council declared the Mitchell Lake area to be "a refuge for shorebirds and waterfowl." In 1987 a new sewage treatment plant replaced the old one, no more sludge went to the lake, and it began to dry up. The Wastewater Department of the City began sending treated effluent from a local plant into Mitchell Lake to maintain its water level. In 1990 Volunteers from the League of Women Voters, the Junior League of San Antonio, Bexar Audubon and San Antonio Audubon Societies sponsored a 5-year Wetlands Project at Mitchell Lake. During the final year of the Project, The Mitchell Lake Wetlands Society was formed as a 501(c)(3) organization to promote the wise stewardship of the wildlife refuge at Mitchell Lake.

## **CONVERSION OF ABANDONED SEWAGE LAGOON INTO WILDLIFE REFUGE:**

The San Antonio Water System, the utility that now controls the Mitchell Lake area, has agreed to continue a public/private partnership in which they continue to deal with the water issues of the area and the Mitchell Lake Wetlands Society in cooperation with like-minded organizations accepts the responsibilities of managing the Mitchell Lake Wildlife Refuge.

**OPPORTUNITIES FOR VOLUNTEERING AT THE REFUGE:** A major construction project is under way at the Mitchell Lake Wildlife Refuge, but by this fall it will be completed and a wide variety of skills and interests will be needed and welcomed. Some of these are:

**Field Research:** If you are interested in plants, animals, living communities (ecology), water quality, wildscape development, habitat enhancement, etc., there will be opportunities to participate in research projects with one of our cooperating organizations:

UTSA's Center for Water Research  
Native Plant Society  
Master Naturalists

**Birding Tours:** If you enjoy birding or would like to become a birder, the coordinator of the birding tours at the refuge needs help by qualified volunteers.

**Natural Science Library:** The historic building being moved to the refuge will be the Wildlife Refuge Center. In addition to having an office, conference rooms and a laboratory, it will have a library on the second floor. The volunteer in charge of the library will welcome help in organizing and sharing it with the community.

**Gardening:** The wildscape around the Wildlife Refuge Center will need care and attention by dedicated volunteers.

**San Antonio History, 17th to 21st Century:** The Mitchell Lake area has a long history. For a time after the Espada Mission was established in 1731, the farms, stables, etc. that supported the mission were located in this area. Anyone interested in history will find this area a gold mine.

**Our Website - [www.mlws.org](http://www.mlws.org):** If you are good with computers, the volunteer in charge of our website would like to share the fun.

**Educational Materials, Maps and Brochures:** If you enjoy writing to share the natural world with the public, the bimonthly newsletter, brochures and maps of the refuge might interest you. A wide variety of educational materials related to the refuge would be helpful.

**Administrative Services:** If you enjoy organizing and responsibility, volunteering to help with the operations and reporting at the refuge could be a rewarding experience.

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